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Parents explore schools at magnet fair

District 30 sponsors event to show off educational options at 10 schools

By Dustin Brown

More than 300 parents explored educational opportunities for their children at School District 30's annual Magnet School Fair Monday and Tuesday nights at IS 204 in Long Island City.

Monday's events also featured the only New York appearance by Parents Connected, a national seminar tour designed to show parents how to effectively use the Internet.

"This one seems to be the best-attended Magnet Fair we've had," said PS 2 Principal Joseph Geraci, who sat behind his school's booth watching parents stream into the gymnasium over the course of the four hours.

Maintaining the spirit of its name, the Magnet School Fair was set up like an educational carnival as each of 10 magnet schools in the district erected a booth to pitch its own approach to education.

"It gives parents the opportunity to see some of the rich, wonderful programs District 30 has to offer," said Queens Board of Education representative Terri Thomson, who joined parents for the first two hours of the event. "Parents should have a choice about their children's education."

Parents can apply for their children to attend any magnet school within the district.

Magnet schools base their curriculums around specialized themes, such as business, technology or art, and the schools used their booths at the fair to display their students' finest projects.

The PS 85 table featured a television screen depicting students enrolled in the Theater Arts and Technology Magnet School, waving their arms and kicking their legs in a choreographed rendition of "New York, New York."

Dustin Brown

STUDENTS RAWI GUERRERO (l-r), Nathalie Giraldo, Katherine Polanco and Dominique Fils-Aimé sell merchandise from their school store at the District 30 Magnet School Fair Monday.

PS 149, the Business and Technology Magnet School, was represented by four aspiring entrepreneurs who sold items from the school store.

"I'm convinced there's at least one possible millionaire in that group," Thomson said after chatting with the students.

The magnet school programs are funded through a three-year federal grant cycle which District 30 has received for nine of the past 12 years, said the district's magnet schools coordinator Cheryl Quatrano.

Although the fair only featured the 10 schools funded by the current grant, 20 of the district's 30 schools offer magnet programs established during the current and previous funding cycles. Quatrano said the district hopes to establish magnet programs in all of the district's schools in future funding cycles.

Astoria resident Fanta Arlee, a mother of six who already has two children in magnet programs, said she was impressed that elementary school students enrolled in magnets could produce such advanced work at their age.

"Their being in magnet schools has done something in the way of their education," she said. "I've been to schools that haven't been magnet schools, and I see a difference."

Her son agreed that attending a magnet school was preferable to traditional public-school programs.

"It's kind of fun because you get extra classes and you get more privileges — like we get to go on more trips and we do shows," said Julius Arlee, a sixth-grader.

More than 120 parents and students took a break from the fair to learn about the Internet through Parents Connected.

"The goal is to demystify the Internet for the parents," said Kaila Colbin, the company's chief operating officer, who presented the seminar along with CEO Kenneth LaVan. "They feel more confident engaging with the Internet."

With the rallying cry of "Click, type and go!" Colbin and LaVan led the parents and children through the basics of navigating the Internet and keeping kids safe online. The presentation was repeated in Spanish two hours later for a handful of parents.

Thomson stressed the program was critical to show parents how to stay involved in their children's increasingly technological lives.

"We're in a very different age now," Thomson said, "and parents often don't know how to help their children who are using the Internet every day."

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